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ABSTRACT

The college of education at a midwestern university has designed a program for training senior citizen volunteers to tutor elementary school students in reading and language arts. Development of the Time Of Our Lives for Service (T. O. O. L. S.) program included establishing goals and objectives for the program that were subject to administrative approval, selecting program leaders, drafting a volunteer training handbook, and recruiting senior volunteers. Volunteers receive training in several language arts areas, including selecting children's literature, storytelling, workbook skill instruction, sight vocabulary development, and phonics. The training sessions are very informal, so that the volunteers remain comfortable and at ease. After observing a classroom for several days, the volunteers are placed according to their skills and the needs of a specific classroom and begin tutoring for two hours a week. The project resource person is available to tutors for assistance in the form of materials and guidance. Many volunteers are honored by their teachers and students with gifts and parties. Every effort is made to make the volunteers feel useful and welcome. The volunteers receive an invaluable sense of self-worth and personal satisfaction by helping children learn to read, and by knowing that their spare time is well spent. (HTH)

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Time Of Our Lives for Service (T.O.O.L.S.): Senior Citizens Involved in Developing Basic Skills in the Public Schools

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TIME OF OUR LIVES FOR SERVICE

Introduction

Senior volunteers are participating in community activities in larger numbers throughout the country. Today over 34 million Americans are over sixty years old. Many senior citizens have time to share, but they have no idea where to start. Who needs their help? What kind of assistance do they have to offer? How do others feel about senior volunteers? This "untapped resource" presents potential rewards which outweigh the few special arrangements they may require.

T.O.O.L.S. is an acronym for Time of Our Lives for Service. The program is intended to partially alleviate the problems of providing opportunities for senior citizens to be actively involved in community schools. It proposes pretraining of senior volunteers in procedures necessary for assisting students with basic skills and language enrichment activities.

This program was created by Clyde Colwell and Kathryn Treadway, professors in the College of Education at Kansas State University, and was funded by a Federal grant through the university. This was a Title 1-A Higher Education Act grant.

A basic premise underlying the program is that senior citizens, in general, have a depth of experiences to contribute to the youth involved in any intergenerational program. Another prime consideration is that there exists a natural affinity between the grandparent and grandchild generations. Therefore, if the senior citizens, with the qualities described intact, receive training in educational strategies they become extremely highly valued volunteers in the

school system. To progress from being a caring senior citizen to becoming a caring, effective volunteer educator requires a commitment to a series of learning experiences and eventual regular placement in a school environment.

Development

To develop the full capabilities of senior citizens required a new type of programmatic concept. From the inception to the fruition of the T.O.O.L.S. concept, our Development - Training - Placement and Follow-up Model consisted of several steps. Those steps are delineated as follows:

(1) Interested teacher-trainers at the KSU College of Education interacted with senior citizens and senior citizen agencies to establish goals and objectives for the program.

(2) Program leaders were selected and the job descriptions were formulated.

(3) The components of the program were presented to central office personnel in the school districts involved for modification and approval.

(4) A Volunteer Training Handbook was conceptualized(described later in this paper) and a working draft was prepared.

(5) Mass media and personal contacts at senior meetings were utilized extensively to recruit senior volunteers.

(6) Participating classroom teachers and principals were kept informed and began preparation for their volunteers.

(7) Initial training sessions were scheduled and conducted.

(8) Volunteers were placed in selected classrooms.

(9) Follow-up assistance from program leaders was made available to senior volunteers.

(10) Recognition via certificates, parties, etc. was provided for the volunteers.

(11) A slide-tape presentation was developed to assist senior agencies elsewhere to establish similar training programs.

Community support was generated through personal conferences with leaders to explain the purposes and potentials of the program and to request suggestions for program development. Letters of support were received from public schools, the Area Agency on Aging, the Retired Senior Volunteer Program(hereafter, R.S.V.P.), the Retired Teachers Association, and the Kansas State University Center on Aging. R.S.V.P. became the primary source of assistance in recruitment and transportation of senior citizens. Local public schools assured assistance in placement of trained volunteers into the classroom.

Volunteers were recruited by the program leaders through presentations to organizations whose membership consists primarily of senior citizens. Newsletters, newspaper articles, and radio and television announcements publicized the training sessions. An initial training period of three two and one-half hour classes focused on introducing the overall program, alleviating personal concerns, and actual instruction.

Instruction covers eight areas, some cognitive and some affective, that are usually deemed important to reading/language arts development.

These eight areas are the following:

1. The Language Experience Approach
2. Selecting and reading children's literature
3. Storytelling
4. Workbook skill instruction
5. Development of sight vocabulary
6. Phonics skill instruction
7. Critical listening, and
8. Critiquing students' writing

Each of these eight individual areas was developed into a training module for inclusion in the Volunteer Training Handbook. A brief rationale for each of the eight strategies is presented in the paragraphs that follow.

The Language Experience Approach uses the experiences and words of the student to promote understanding of the reading process. It helps them see the close relationship among reading, speaking, writing, and listening. Roach Van and Claryce Allen expressed this concept in Language Experiences in Reading(1966) as follows:

> What I can think about, I can talk about.
> What I can say, I can write.
> What I can write, I can read.
> I can read what I write and what other people can write for me to read.

Selecting and Reading Children's Literature. Much time is spent teaching students how to read, but it is equally important to provide them an opportunity to select and read appropriate books. Enjoyable practice frequently experienced reinforces the reading process. Helping students select books to read involves knowledge of their interests, knowledge of their reading abilities, and knowledge of the reading grade level of the available books. Then a trip to the library or to the bookshelf can be a satisfying experience.

Storytelling is an enjoyable activity which helps the student develop necessary listening skills. The student must learn not only to pay attention to the speaker, but also to think about what he hears, to structure information, and to evaluate the message.

The reading workbook exercise is a daily event in many classrooms. Students receive basal instruction in the reading circle, receive the related workbook assignment from the teacher, and return to their desks for this written practice while the teacher instructs the next group. Although most students soon become adept at following the written directions, other flounder and need individual guidance in reading and understanding the activity instructions.

Development of Sight Vocabulary. Reading is recognizing the meaning of all the printed words as they relate to each other. Most words used in primary grade readers are common to the child's speaking vocabulary. They are known words. The students must learn to recognize the known words so they can think about what those words say. Sounding out words distracts from thinking about meaning, so some unrecognized words should be taught before the student starts to read the story.

Phonics Skill Instruction. When students are reading, they may attack an unknown words by using their knowledge of phonics to decode the word. It is like trying to decode a mystery message. What sound does each of the letters represent? Then one must blend those sounds together to recognize the word.

Critical Listening. In their oral reading elementary school students usually reveal specific handicaps to understanding. Problems may be corrected through direct instruction. The problem may be inability to sound out an unknown word, poor recognition of basic sight words, unmeaningful grouping of words, or lack of meaningful expression of feelings of words and sentences. Marking such miscues on a ditto copy of the story will give the teacher an opportunity to analyze the types of errors and propose corrective instruction.

Critiquing Students' Writing. The primary purpose of writing is to share your ideas with others or to preserve them for your own future reference. The ideas must be organized and clearly presented so the recipients of the "message" understand exactly what you want them to know. First, they must determine for whom their message is intended. Second, students must decide specifically what they want to say. Third, they must pre-plan how to organize the message so it will be accurately received.

Coordinating Volunteer Services

Coordinating volunteer services with the participating school district demands the cooperation of many people - the tutor, the teacher, the school and its principal, the district school supervisors, and the T.O.O.L.S. personnel. The school supervisor should review

the program and advise the program and R.S.V.P. leaders on effective management of the project in the schools.

Senior volunteers face several potential problems concerning entry into the school system. It is the job of the T.O.O.L.S. personnel to make this entry as smooth as possible. The primary questions of the volunteers are as follows:

What can I do in the classroom?

Who will show me how?

Will the teacher and children like me?

Will I be in the way?

How will I find a classroom in which to work?

How will I get to my school?

These are the answers which must be found before recruitment even begins. The school supervisor may answer several questions with the assurance that teachers would be informed about the program's potential and encouraged to request a volunteer. Therefore, volunteers would enter a classroom where they were wanted and needed. The contributions which the tutor is qualified to make would be understood. The principal would be informed of the new volunteers and would greet them and show them the school facilities.

The teacher requests for volunteers would be forwarded to T.O.O.L.S. personnel who would meet with the teacher and then introduce teacher and tutor. At that time a specific schedule should be established for student tutoring. Selection of students is made by the teacher and is based on knowledge of the students and their needs. The students are usually those who are not achieving up to their potential - perhaps

a slow learner, an unmotivated learner, or a child who has been absent for a lengthy period of time.

Transportation to the school must be provided for many senior volunteers who no longer drive automobiles or prefer not to pay out of their own pocket for bus, cab, or gasoline to get them to a non-paying job. One solution to this problem is the cooperative financing of the R.S.V.P. van busing service. These vans are driven by other volunteers, so expenses are lower. Volunteers only need to call the R.S.V.P. offices and ask for membership papers. Then they are free to schedule the van to transport them to their volunteer job. In some communities taxi cabs charge reduced rates for seniors and the resulting lowered fare may be paid jointly by T.O.O.L.S. and R.S.V.P.

Recruitment

After the coordination of school and community commitments has been accomplished, participants are recruited. Then a specific time and site for training sessions are established and these potential tutors are notified. The class arrives in the R.S.V.P. van. The camaraderie and mutual support system is strengthened through light conversation as the van makes the rounds of homes and apartments. They usually arrive somewhat nervous about their new experience, but relaxed by the fact that they are now acquainted with each other. After the training session, the van returns them to their homes and they are able, in route, to share their new concerns with each other.

Training

Training begins with three two and one-half hour classes. The class environment is very informal and unlike many college classes.

Our students and teachers are seated around conference tables which provide plenty of space for craft materials, books, and personal items. Chairs are comfortable - a more than minor consideration for many older people. It is a problem-solving atmosphere which requires attention and participation rather than notetaking and exams. The experience is non-threatening and congenial.

T.O.O.L.S. personnel introduce an instructional strategy such as the Language Experience Approach and explain its significance in teaching the reading process. Instructors use various forms of media such as overhead projectors, filmstrips, and tape recordings to make the message clear and easy to understand. The atmosphere is kept relaxed and congenial so trainees will feel free to ask questions about points they don't understand and methods and materials which may be different from those which were used when they were elementary students over fifty years ago.

This is followed by instructional activities in which everyone practices teaching through role-playing. A children's picture book may be used to show how the illustrations can stimulate the children to talk and to dictate sentences which the tutor can write down for the reading lesson. Soon nervousness is overcome by the fun partners have "teaching" each other. Role-playing also gave the instructors the opportunity to observe and evaluate how well trainees understood the objectives of the strategy.

During the session a tea and cookie break gives everyone an opportunity to refresh themselves and walk around a little. It also gives the instructors time to visit with individuals and get to know

them personally. Some volunteers will have questions and concerns which they hesitate to voice before the entire class. Personal contacts help alleviate fears and help diagnose strengths and weaknesses in the teaching - learning experience.

Construction of instructional materials is a significant experience in the training program since most classrooms are equipped for group instruction rather than "one-on-one" individual tutoring. Activities teach and support current objectives established by the classroom teacher. Many are simple practice exercises in the form of card games, board games, and cut-and-paste motivational projects such as simple puppets and posters. Activities are demonstrated by the instructors, explained in The Volunteer Handbook, and made during the class period.

At the conclusion of the day's training session, the instructional strategy is reviewed and related again to the reading process. Then trainees board the R.S.V.P. van for the return trip home.

Placement

Following initial training, the tutor observes for several days in the new classroom. Many volunteers have grandchildren and find themselves comfortable in the midst of the children. The teacher introduces the tutor to the children with whom she will work and gives these children the opportunity to show the visitor around the classroom - their science center, their library, their activity centers, and their reading center. Soon the tutor finds the arrival is eagerly anticipated by the children who enjoy the warm and friendly attention.

Some days the tutor reads a story to a group. The children help select favorite books and are eager to share their opinions about the

pictures or point out a word they recognize. Every day specific attention is devoted to the students assigned for tutoring. The teacher may keep a special notebook in which is written a few brief suggestions for the day's activities and in which the tutor responds about what was accomplished and notes any questions which arose during the day.

This is not the end of this story - it is a beginning. Two days a week the tutor and new friends brighten each others' lives by sharing themselves. Spare time is being devoted to an extremely important job --- teaching children to read and to appreciate the skills and abilities of senior citizens.

Follow-up

The project resource person is available to tutors and teachers for advice. Assistance may be in the form of materials, instructional guidance, equipment, or friendly conversation about recent activities. T.O.O.L.S. personnel are always accessible for consultation.

Recognition

Many T.O.O.L.S. volunteers have been honored by their teachers and students with gifts, parties, dinners, and recognition in faculty meetings and Parent-Teacher Associations. They acquire a feeling of personal satisfaction and usefulness - a feeling of a worthy contribution to the community. On a regular schedule, two mornings a week, they get out of the house and stimulate their minds and bodies in an enjoyable and valuable activity.

As enthusiasm generates more volunteers, they are welcomed into the program. On a regular schedule newcomer training sessions are held and follow-up training sessions are provided for active volunteers

to add new tutoring skills. After a semester of active participation in the classroom, tutors are full of questions and arrive eager to share activity ideas which they have learned in the classroom or have created themselves.

The message of the T.O.O.L.S. program is that children and older people have much to offer each other. It is the Time of Our Lives for Service for millions of Americans who will find the T.O.O.L.S. concept viable for their volunteer activities. Time, energy, and effort are demanded, but the personal gains for the tutor are valuable - the satisfaction of helping children - and the joy of participating in their growth. For two hours a week, they are free to be with children again; children who laugh, share deep emotions, and see the world with wonder and eager anticipation.